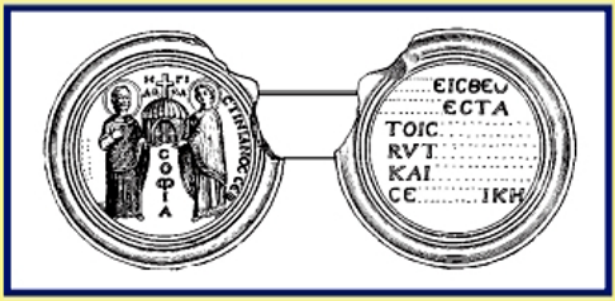
SIATRAS NUMISMATIC STUDIES, 12

Demetrius N. Siatras

The Byzantine Lead Seals *of* Francesco Ficoroni



ATHENS 2025

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 6

SIATRAS SERIES OF NUMISMATIC STUDIES, No. 12

Demetrius N. Siatras

The Byzantine Lead Seals of Francesco Ficoroni

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FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 7

PREFACE

The classical world enters a phase of decline with the rise of Christianity and eventually disappears. As Kenneth Clark characteristically remarks in the monumental BBC television series *Civilisation*, "like bleached relics under the Mediterranean sun, lie the remains of the ancient temples".

The classical man — as a mentality, a quality, a way of life, and a form of thought — is lost forever and will never return; however, he left behind a great legacy, preserved both as a written tradition and as an artistic creation. The first revival of classical antiquity appears to have originated with the flourishing of letters in Moorish Spain. Some argue that the early Renaissance should be traced to Toledo — particularly to the Arab commentators on Aristotle who thrived there in the 11th century. Yet the enthusiasm of a few scholars or art lovers alone would not have been enough to spark a movement capable of reshaping society as a whole. A critical mass was needed to trigger the cultural big bang; and, at some point, that mass was formed thanks to the unimaginable wealth of the Medici initially and, later, of the popes! The substantial funds the Medici devoted to letters and the arts attracted to Florence the leading artists and scholars of the era; thus, the great turn towards antiquity took place in 15th-century Florence. From there, the new cultural trend spread throughout Western Europe — with the migration of Byzantine scholars to the West after the Fall of Constantinople serving as a key catalyst of this change.

In the following century the popes took up the mantle, and the center of the Renaissance shifted to Rome. The city, filled with ancient buildings and statues, provided ideal models for artists (interest in the ancient monuments of the Hellenic world emerged relatively late: around the middle of the 18th century).

In the mid-17th century, it had become fashionable among the Western European upper classes (primarily the English ones) to tour

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 8

Italy in order to encounter and admire the classical world; perhaps more than a fashion, this journey was regarded as a necessary complement to the education of the young members of the aristocracy. Travellers would cross the Alps to enter Italy and then descend south. The *Grand Tour* typically ended in Sicily, but the more adventurous continued on to neighbouring countries, reaching as far as Portugal, Greece and the Middle East.

Travellers of this type had two basic qualifications: wealth and a classical education. As a consequence, collectors and hunters of antiquities, antiquarians, and educated guides appeared — especially the latter, the famous *ciceroni*, who provided a multitude of services to the visitors flocking there. The most famous and perhaps the most charismatic of them was Francesco de' Ficoroni (1664-1747), born in Lugnano, a small town near Rome. He distinguished himself primarily as a collector of ancient objects, mainly Roman and Etruscan, but also as a sought-after antiquarian, archaeologist, writer, and tour guide — at times controversial and occasionally pushing the boundaries of criminal law, he was nonetheless inventive and ingenious. His collection included more than 5,000 objects, mostly from excavations he himself carried out between 1705 and 1710; among them was the famous *cista*, an elaborate cylindrical bronze vessel, probably intended for religious ceremonies (today adorns the Etruscan Museum at Rome).

Among the objects systematically recorded by historians and archaeologists over the past three centuries are the lead seals of secular and religious officials from the Byzantine Empire. Ficoroni was probably the first to collect, record and publish medieval seals in a manner that more or less resembles the modern approach. His descriptions are somewhat "primitive", but readers should keep in mind that sigillography was still in its early stages during the early decades of the 18th century. Many younger researchers are harsh on Ficoroni, often overlooking the historical context of his era. Sabatier,* for example, criticizes him for failing to explain the origin, purpose, and use of the seals he published, for not classifying them by period or category, and for including errors in his descriptions. Of course,

(*) M.J. Sabatier, "Plombs, bulles et sceaux byzantins", *Revue Archéologique* 1858, vol. 1, p. 83.

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 9

Ficoroni's work contains mistakes, just as there are errors in Sabatier's own descriptions. Other authors have also voiced some criticisms of Ficoroni, but as D.M. Metcalf once told me, "there is no book without mistakes; we must simply strive to make our books as error-free as possible".

The current edition primarily presents Byzantine lead seals from the Ficoroni collection, as featured in his book *I Piombi Antichi* (Roma, 1740), along with papal lead seals (Appendix I). Several obvious errors have been corrected (see the list of corrections at the end of the book), and transcriptions of numerous legends have been added. Finally, a description of the well-known seal of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople, first described by Francesco Ficoroni in the same book, has been included as Appendix II.

Demetrius Siatras
Athens, March 2025

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 11

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Italian original: *I Piombi antichi* (1740). 13
The Latin version (1750) 16

CHAPTER
1 17
2 21
3 23
4 25
5 29
6 33
7 35
8 39
9 41
10 43
11 47
12 51
13 55
14 59
15 61

APPENDIX I - LEAD SEALS OF THE POPES 65

APPENDIX II - THE FAMOUS SEAL OF THE GREAT CHURCH -
From Ficoroni to Schlumberger 69

PLATES 75

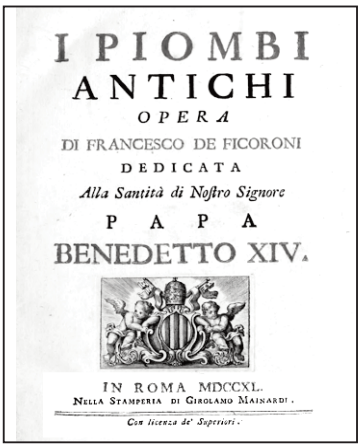
HYPOMNEMA 95

INDEX 97

Matching the chapters of the current edition
with those of the first Italian edition 99

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 13

I PIOMBI ANTICHI.
A short description of the original


I PIOMBI
ANTICHI
OPERA
DI FRANCESCO DE FICORONI
DEDICATA
Alla Santità di Nostro Signore
P A P A
BENEDETTO XIV.
IN ROMA MDCCXL.
Nella Stamperia di Girolamo Mainardi.
Con licenza de' Superiori.

The book *"I piombi antichi"* was printed in Rome by Girolamo Mainardi in 1740, in royal quarto format (28 cm); it contains 168 pages of text (actually 172, as pages 89-92 are repeated) plus a few preliminary pages; it is divided into two parts, which are further subdivided into 71 small untitled chapters of a few pages each; a *hors-texte* engraved plate accompanies each chapter, increasing the total number of pages to 320. Overall, it is a well-produced volume featuring fine engravings.

The book is dedicated to pope Benedict XIV, probably a trick of the author to detour the strict censorship of the era. The *approvazione* from the censorship committee is signed by Fr. Gio. Antonio Bianchi and is also published at the beginning of the book.

The descriptions of the seals may seem somewhat "primitive" — *e.g.* no dimensions are given, no transcriptions, *etc.* — but readers should keep in mind that these were only the earliest steps in sigillography; we are far away from the systems used later for the presentation, transcription, and classification of Byzantine seals.

Parte prima - *De' piombi antichi*

The first Part begins with an introduction (pp. 1–4) to ancient seals which the author classifies into two main categories: lead seals (*piombi*) and clay seals (made of *fine creta*); he then references relevant works by previous scholars.

CHAPTERS I & II (pp. 5–15)

In the first two chapters, the author presents seals of the emperors Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Commodus, Marcus Aurelius, and others.

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 15

CHAPTER III (pp. 16–18)

Coloured clay seals are also featured, including a seal of the emperor Nero, bearing the inscription::

IMP. NERO CLAVDIVS CAESAR AVG. GER. PM. TR. . . .,

and a seal bearing the crowned head of Antinus.

CHAPTER IV (pp. 19–21)

Various seals of unknown persons. A seal bearing an unidentified bust surrounded by the cyclical inscription **UTERE FELIX**. Seals of Agrippina and Nero, M. Aurelius, S. Severus.

CHAPTERS V – XX (pp. 22–65)

The main part of the book consists of chapters featuring imperial, secular, and ecclesiastic seals with Latin or Greek inscriptions; the presence of the cross is a distinctive characteristic.

CHAPTERS XXI – XXV (pp. 66–76)

The final chapters of the first part contain lead seals of the popes. Almost all of them bear on the obverse side the name of the owner and on the reverse the word *PAPAE*.

Parte seconda - ***Delle picole medaglie di piombo***

The second part of the original work (Introduction, chapters I–XXXV, plates I–XXXV) features small lead medallions from the Roman era, beginning with those of the emperor Nero; a lot of them bear only depictions (animals, persons, Greek/Roman gods, various items), while others bear only inscriptions written in Latin (mostly) or Greek (very few).

The second part ends with an appendix in which stone medallions (made of white or colour stone) are presented.

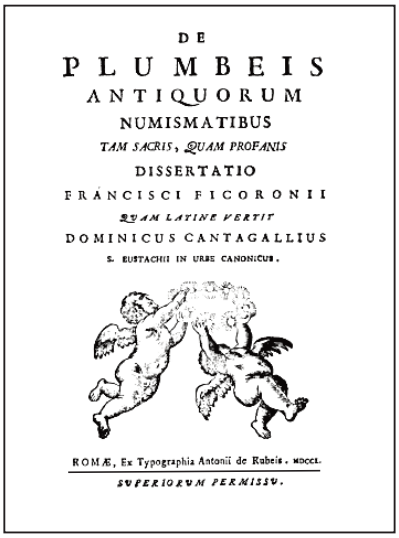
For the matching of the chapters of the current edition with those of the first Italian edition, see page 99.

The Latin version (1750)

Ten years after the release of the Italian edition, a Latin version of the book was published in Rome under the title:

De plumbeis antiquorum numismatibus tam sacris, quam profanis dissertatio Fransisci Ficoronii.

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 16


DE
PLUMBEIS
ANTIQUORUM
NUMISMATIBUS
TAM SACRIS, QUAM PROFANIS
DISSERTATIO
FRANCISCI FICORONII
QUAM LATINE VERTIT
DOMINICUS CANTAGALLIUS
S. EUSTACHII IN URBE CANONICUS.
ROMÆ, Ex Typographia Antonii de Rubeis. MDCCL.
SUPERIORUM PERMISSU.

It was translated into Latin by Dominicus Cantagallius, a Jesuit monk and eminent scholar of the era who, like Ficoroni, was also an antiquarian; his real name was Archangelo Contucci (1688-1768).* We can reasonably assume that Contucci possessed all the necessary qualifications for an excellent translation (among his various activities, he served as a professor of rhetoric at the local Jesuit College). Furthermore, with the exception of just a few bibliographic additions and the correction of some obvious errors, the translation is absolutely faithful faithful to both the text and the plates; in conclusion, a definitely good translation.

The purpose of the Latin version was to introduce the book to a wider audience, as the translator notes at the beginning of his introduction; it was intended as an international edition. Ficoroni had passed away by the time it was released; but considering the long time needed for the production of a book and even more that the same year was also published in Rome the Latin version of another book by Ficoroni *(De larvis scenicis et figuris comicis antiquorum romanorum),* also translated by Contucci, we assume that the *post-mortem* Latin edition was originally a project initiated by Ficoroni himself.

(*) *The General Biographical Dictionary*, vol. XIV, London 1814, p. 273.

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 21

CHAPTER 2
(Plate II)

1. *Obv.** Block monogram, analysed as **NOTARIUS**; double circular border around it.

Rev. Inscription in three lines:

+ IUS
TINIA + ***Iustinianus***
NUS

It reminds other lead seals with the same dignity and office, either secular or ecclesiastic.

2. *Obv.* Busts of two crowned emperors, surrounded by a wreath border. A cross in the field above them.

They are probably Justinus and Justinian.

Rev. Winged Victory holding two wreaths; dotted border.

3. A three-line inscription surrounded by a wreath border on each side.

Obv.
GAV
EN ***Gaudentii***
TII

Rev.
PRI
MICI ***primicirii***
RII

According to du Cange, the first in each class of officers was called *primicerius*; so, there existed the primicerius of the economics, the primicerius of the notaries (who was later known as the *protonotarius*), and

(*) Ficoroni does not depict the seals in his plates as it is the usual today, *i.e.* the obverse side is not always to the left or to the top of the image.

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 37

Rev. Emperor standing facing and holding the globus cruciger in his right hand. In the field to the left and right the letters: Α - ΙΒ. The entire depiction is surrounded by the circular inscription:

ΑΠΟΘΠΑ ... ΝΤΙΝΟΥ

Ἀπὸ ἐπά[ρχων Κωνστα]ντίνου

6. A three-line inscription on each side; wreath border:

Obv. ΑΡ | ΙΧΑ | VΜΑ

Rev. ΝΘ | ΒΙΘ | ΠΙΓΒ +

7. *Obv.* Invocative cruciform monogram in a dotted border:

ΙΧΒ *Ἰ(ησοῦ) Χ(ριστέ), β(οήθει)*
(= Jesus Christus auxilietur)

Rev. Inscription in five lines; in a dotted border:

ΜΑV	*Μαυ-*	
ΡΙΚΙΩ	*ρικίῳ*	
ΑΠΟΘΠ	*ἀπὸ ἐπ-*	
ΑΡΧΩ	*ἀρχω-*	
Ν	*ν*	*(= Mauricio praefecto)*

8. *Obv.* Invocative cruciform monogram in a dotted border, analysed as:

ΗCΡΟΗΘΕΙΤΟ *Ἰ(ησοῦ) Χ(ριστέ), β(οήθει)*
(= Jesus Christus auxilietur)

Rev. Similar to the previous seal.

9. An invocative cruciform monogram in a dotted border on each side; the invocation is in Latin on the obverse side; on the reverse side it is in Greek:

Obv. ΑΝC ***A(djuva) n(os) C(hriste)***

Rev. ΚΒΟΗΘ ***Κ(ύριε), βοήθ(ει)***

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 61

CHAPTER 15
(Plate XIV)

1. *Obv.* Half figure, facing, of Saint Peter; he holds two keys in his right hand and a cross in his left; enclosed within a double circular border, with his name inscribed along the border.:

+ SANCTVS PETRVS

Rev. Saint Peter, holding a cross in his left hand, is preaching to the people of Antioch standing on the *Navicella*; above them, in the field, the walls of the city. In a double circular border; inscription in the interior of the border:

+ S·CVMVNIS:ANTIOCHIE

+ *S(igillum)·Cumunis : Antiochi<a>e*

Antioch was captured by the Crusaders in 1098 and remained under Latin control until 1268. The depiction symbolizes the establishment of Latin dominion in the city following the expulsion of the barbarians. This lead seal dates from that period and is attributed to the Antioch Community.

2. On both sides an inscription in three lines, beginning with a cross.

Obv.	+ FOC | II	***Focii***
Rev.	+ PAT | RICII	***patricii***

It was found in Celio, a village near Rome, in 1727.

3. On both sides an inscription in four lines, beginning with a cross; in an indeterminate border.

Obv.	+ Κ|ωΝCΤ|ΑΝΤΙ|Νδ	+ ***Κωνσταντίνου***
Rev.	+ ΘЄ|ΤΟΚ|ЯΟΗ|ΘΗ +	+ ***Θε<ο>τόκ<ε>, βοήθη*** + *(= Deipara, adjuva Constantinum)*

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 69

APPENDIX II

THE FAMOUS SEAL OF THE GREAT CHURCH
From Ficoroni to Schlumberger

Besides his many contributions to archaeology, Ficoroni is also credited with the first publication of the famous seal of the Hagia Sophia church at Constantinople.

Schlumberger describes this church and the clergy who served there as

> *"le plus nombreux et le plus puissant du moyen-âge, cet immense clergé de cet immense édifice, centre du monde religieux byzantin".*[1]

Therefore, one can easily understand the significance of the seals of this enormous cathedral. Beyond its historical importance, this seal is one of the largest ever found, with a diameter of 50 mm.

Ficoroni's piece was corroded, and he refrained from completing the inscriptions on both sides, offering only a brief description of the obverse; we have encountered this in Chapter 6, page 37, of the current edition. His drawing of the seal is likely more useful. *(Figure 1)*.

---

[1] G. Schlumberger, "Sceaux byzantins". In: *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 1883, 7:169.

[2] The original Italian text is as follows: "Questo piombo indorato, di grandezza come si mostra in disegno, è di peso oncie cinque e una quarta: Le figure sono dell'Imperator Giustiniano, e di Teodora sua Moglie, come si raccoglie dal residuo dell' iscrizzione corrosa . . . . . CTINIANOC.CϴR. Il Tempio, che i due Augusti Conforti sostengono, è quello che in onore della Divina Sapienza cominciato da Giustino, fù poi perfezzionato da Giustiniano, chiamato vulgarmente S. Sofia, e tanto, come ogn'un vede, significano le lettere, che ricorrono sopra, e sotto a questo Tempio H AGIA COFIA. Nel roverscio è gran danno, che l'iscrizzione sia guasta." *(I piombi antichi,* p. 38, no. 1).

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 70

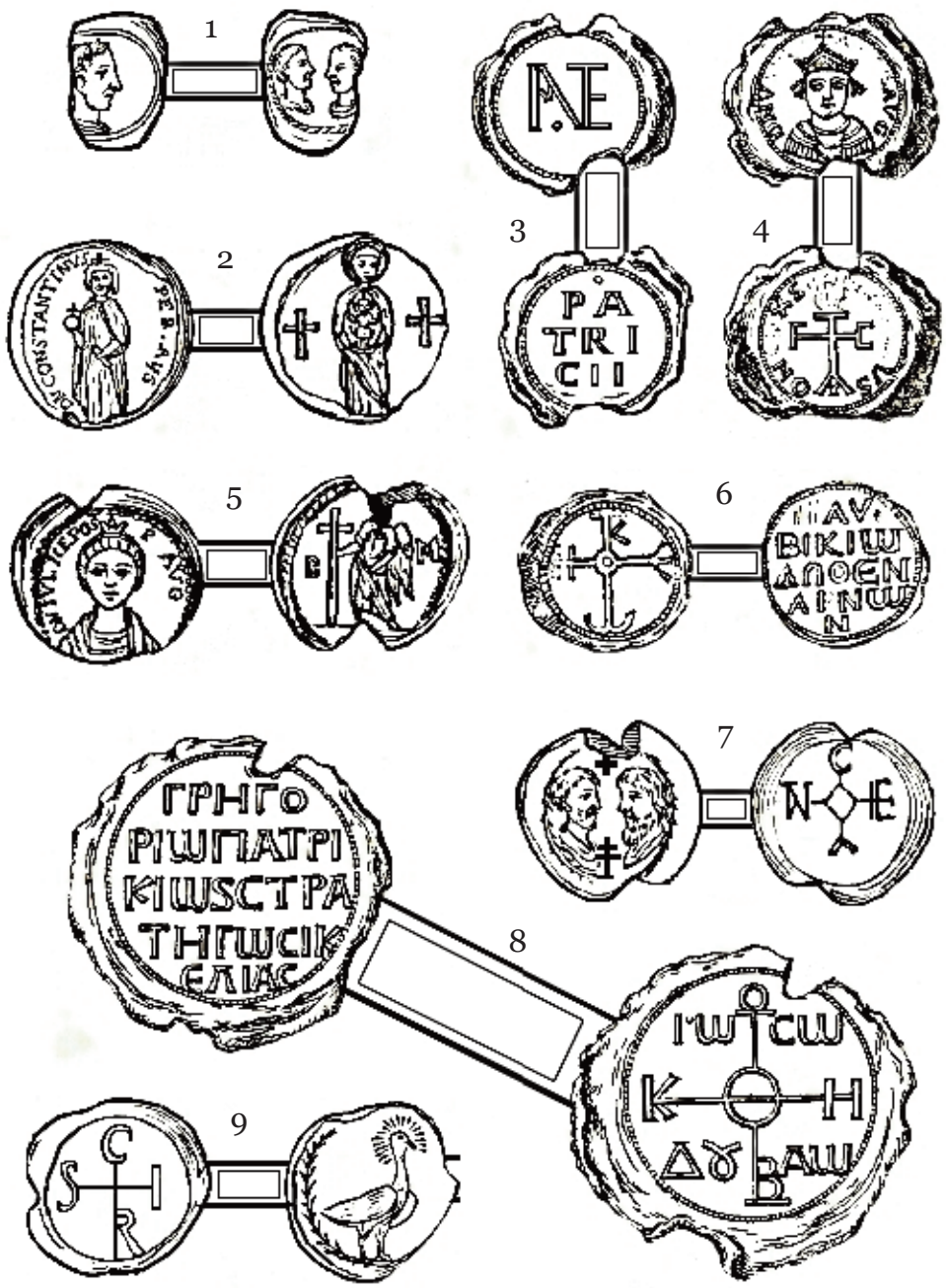
Figure 1. Ficoroni's image.

Figure 2. Lenormant's image.

Figure 3. Mordtmann's image.
The restored seal with the completed inscriptions.

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 77

PLATE I



FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 97

INDEX

Agrippina 15
Almerico, bishop 39
Anastasius, bishop of Albano 45
Antinus 15
Antioch 39, 61
Antoninus Pius 13
Antonio, bishop of Catania 47
Arcadius 33
Ataulf 33

Belissarius 19
Benedictus, pope 66
Benevento 19
Bottarius 28
Brescia 31

Cange, du 21, 26, 29, 33, 35, 44, 73
Capua 31
Catania 47
Celio 61
Ciacconius 24, 26, 44, 67
Ciampini 28
Colombini 23
Commodus 13
Comnenus, Alexius 35, 71
Constantine the Great 17, 41, 62
Constantinople 30, 49, 51, 69, 71, 72
Constantinus V Copronymus 17, 67
Crispus 17

Du Cange. Βλ. *Cange, du.*

Emilia, region of — 49

Galla Placidia 33
Genseric 19
Giovanni di Giovanni, monsignor 62
Gubbio 31

Hadrian 13
Hagia Sophia, church 33, 69, 71-74
Heraclius 35
Honorius 33

Italy 7, 26, 41, 49

Jesuates 23
Joannis Illustris 29
John V, pope 65
Julius Nepos 18
Justinian I 22, 33
Justinian II 35
Justinus 18, 21, 33

Kircherian Museum 44*ftn*

Lenormant 70, 71, 74
Leontius, bishop
of Tauromemitanum 62
Lombards 41

Mabillon 22, 65
Marco Monaco 45
Marcus Aurelius 13, 15
Michael II the Amorian 19
Monte Cassino 45

FICORONI:Σχέδιο 1 21/01/2026 06:16 Page 101

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